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***Witchcraft in early modern Europe. Studies in culture and belief.*** By Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts. (Past and Present Publications.) Pp. xiv + 371 inc. 6 ills. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, £40. 0 52 1 55224 9A ***delusion of Satan. The full story of the Salem witch trials.*** By Frances Hill. Pp. xvii + 269 + 8 plates. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996 (first publ. Doubleday 1995). £18. 0 241 13672 5***Instruments of darkness. Witchcraft in England, 1550–1750.*** By James Sharpe. Pp. xiv + 365. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996. £25. 0 241 12924 9

Ronald Hutton

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introductory lecture, transcribing the most obvious passages as if announcing a discovery – but abounds with fascinating *trouvailles*: an anticipation of Rochester in the neo-Latin poet Pacifico Massimi, a ‘piquant celebration of the female bottom’ in a poem which the authors came across without knowing that it is by Vincent de Voiture (pp. 43–5), a manuscript treatise on marriage from eighteenth-century Picardy (pp. 35–6).

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This clutch of books treats an identical theme in very different ways. The first represents the proceedings of an international conference held at Exeter University in 1991 to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the decline of magic*. The second is a richly detailed and dramatic narrative of the famous trials at Salem in 1692, based on a synthesis of recent scholarship and produced by a journalist and novelist. The third is a monument to research, over ten years in the making and produced by the best claimant to the title of leading expert in its field. Building upon his twin strengths, of familiarity with legal processes and an understanding of popular printed works, he moves deftly between a series of discrete aspects of the subject, never allowing the density of material gathered for it to hamper his clarity of exposition. Between them, therefore, these books represent fifteen writers; they provide a good opportunity to review the state of informed opinion regarding early modern witch trials at the present moment.

One obvious revelation is of a shift in the global centres of research. The epicentre is now Germany, where dozens of monographs have been produced in the past ten years. Almost none has been translated, although Wolfgang Behringer’s essay in the Cambridge University Press collection provides some overview of their import. Germany has also led the way in establishing the tradition of big international conferences on the subject, with comprehensive publication, of which the one at Exeter was an extension. The dynamic set up by these has encouraged work in most of the other countries of western and central Europe. By contrast, the United States, which for a hundred years was in the forefront of investigation, has recently slipped far behind. Although old hands like Brian Levack can still provide excellent reconsiderations, most American writing about the witch trials now takes the form of sensationalist accounts by non-experts (though often still academics), intent upon treating them as an Awful Warning which enables the author to criticise a particular aspect of modern western culture. Frances Hill’s book, by extension, belongs to this group. Britain has been fortunate in sharing in the general European upsurge of activity,

and the more so in that the past couple of years has seen the completion of major studies long in the process of maturation. Jim Sharpe's is one of these; others have just appeared, or are appearing now, from Robin Briggs, Stuart Clark and Diane Purkiss.

What, then, has altered in theories of explanation? The greatest single shift has been from viewing the pressure for witch prosecution as originating among religious and political elites, to seeing it as emanating from the populace. The trials happened because ordinary people were terrified of witches and wanted to be protected from them by the legal system if negotiation and counter-magic failed. The main thrust of recent research, therefore, has been to reconstruct, as completely as possible, the mentalities and belief-systems which incorporated this fear as an integral component. It is reflected in all three of the books reviewed here, Sharpe's naturally making the most extended and important contribution. What is emerging is a world-picture soaked in magic, from top to bottom, in which arcane human power relates in different ways to a complex of divine, demonic, or natural spiritual forces. Different social groups represent points in spectra of beliefs, rather than opposed intellectual constructions; thus, the learned demonologist is usually at the same time informed by folklore and struggling to correct it. Scepticism concerning witchcraft was always present, at every social level, in varying forms and strengths at different times.

So far, so good. Now the current set of problems begins. It is obvious that witch trials were both most numerous and most bloody in places and times of religious tension, consequent upon the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. It is also clear that they occurred in states confessing both Catholicism and every main division of Protestantism; what is not obvious is why some should have tried and executed people for witchcraft in much larger numbers than other states with an identical confessional allegiance. Likewise, it is also now proven that the worst panics occurred in small states, where the magistrates were mostly easily carried away by the fears of the populace, while larger political units, equipped with a more remote and professional judicial system, produced fewer trials and more acquittals. On the other hand, some tiny states in regions of intense witch hunting were apparently unaffected. The sum of the recent research is that monocausal explanations of witch hunting do not work, and that local clusters of circumstance are crucial; but it has not yet built those local clusters into a generally accepted theory. To put it another way, the current scholarship is much better at accounting for why trials occurred than for why, in many places and for most of the time, they did *not*.

There are other areas of confusion and unease. Almost all of the historians represented here reject the radical feminist theory that the predominance of female victims proves that witch trials were a mechanism by which men controlled women; yet also agree that misogyny was ingrained in the cosmology which produced the trials. There is a consensus that the prosecutions died out when social elites began to abandon belief in a magical universe, but as yet only a hazy idea of why that enormous shift of consciousness itself occurred. Increasingly, experts in early modern witchcraft are recognising that some of its components may be constants in human psychology, but as none of them are trained psychologists, the application of this insight is necessarily hesitant and superficial, although Lyndal Roper (in the Cambridge University Press volume) has the best try.

What perhaps emerges most powerfully from these three works is how deeply

troubled the modern western mind remains by the subject and how much the study of the latter responds to contemporary fears. To nineteenth-century liberals the trials proved the follies and dangers of established religion, and of a non-scientific world view. After the experience of fascism, communism and MacCarthyism, scholars stressed instead the manipulation of popular belief and anxiety by those wielding power. Now the emphasis is all upon the horrific effects of tensions within particular communities, the innate human tendency to anxiety and intolerance, and the internal logic and power of apparently non-rational systems of belief. Clearly the recent wave of local panics provoked by the myth of Satanic ritual abuse has left its mark upon contemporary intellectual culture.

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*Voracious idols and violent hands. Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel.*

By Lee Palmer Wandel. Pp. xii + 205. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. £30. 0 521 47222 9

This study of iconoclasm in three important cities of the Reformation seeks to discern the 'language' of those who acted in destroying objects central to Christian worship. The author poses a problem which is worthy of much consideration: what was the relationship between the preaching of the reformers, the edicts of the magistrates and the passions of those roused by their faith to 'remove' images? The issues are absolutely fundamental and Lee Palmer Wandel offers an innovative and thoughtful approach. To start, she takes on this conundrum through an examination of the understanding of images in church history, and then moves to the case studies of Zurich, Basle and Strasbourg. Her chapter on Zurich, full of echoes from her previous work, is the best. The author uses a wide range of sources to provide 'stories' of iconoclasm, mostly from the hinterland. The conclusions she draws are provocative; she argues for a disjuncture between evangelical preaching and iconoclastic acts. She challenges the idea that preaching provided the motive for action, for to say that 'is to ignore their [the iconoclasts] responsibility, their rationality, their enfranchisement in the enterprise of reform', (p. 62). When one scrutinises the evidence for these sophisticated arguments, however, the ground appears less certain. We are told optimistically that 'at least one iconoclastic act preceded reform preaching' (p. 62). Although her narratives are absorbing and well told, they raise many questions which drift off unexplored into the aether. Indeed the author seems to have a rather rigid analytical mould intended to produce predetermined results. This is the serious problem with the book.

The chapters on Basle and Strasbourg explore iconoclasm in different contexts. In Basle the author argues that our attention is drawn towards the 'particular configuration of the Christian community', whilst in Strasbourg the iconoclasm exposes the 'geography of worship'. Unlike the chapter on Zurich, these two case studies are drawn from the established literature and printed sources and lack, consequently, the freshness of the first study.

Lee Palmer Wandel has challenged our view of the early Reformation and this lively and often passionate book provides food for thought. Having taken on so much, however, it is a shame that she has not given herself more time to develop this material more fully and write a more thorough study which explores the questions she raises. The writing of the book is rather uneven; the author's crisp,